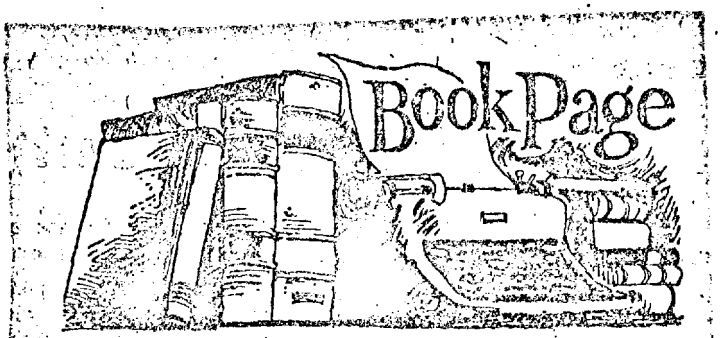
RICHMOND NEWS LEADER
16 AUG 1972



ANN LLOYD MERRIMAN Book Editor

POLITICS, SPIES:

New Novels Concentrate On Pentagon, CIA

PENTAGON COUNTRY, by Clay Blair, Jr.; McGraw-Hill, $7.95.

THE ROPE DANCER, by Victor Marchetti; Grossett and Dunlap, $6.95.

Reviewed by STEVE ROW

The political novel and the political spy novel have come a long way, owing in part to the amazing complexity of national and international government affairs.

These two novels show encouraging and discouraging trends in the state of this relatively new literary form at the present time.

The novel about the Pentagon is a relatively poor mixture of drama and dry facts (such as the length of the Pentagon hallways) as it traces a brief period in the life of a Navy captain, William Montgomery King Jr., who is caught in a situation with pressure from several sides.

King first of all is in line for a promotion to star rank, a promotion which seems tied directly to the success of his section to secure approval of an expensive new submarine weapons system.

Meanwhile his wife is pining away at home, wondering about their future, their wayward son (who, they have just learned, has dropped out of college and run away with a long-haired girl), and whether she is as desirable as she once was.

The novel is constructed well, and some of the dialogue is crisp and realistic, but the situations often stumble on the thin line dividing melodrama and purecorn. The author is a former Time-Life Pentagon correspondent who slips in entirely too much "gee-whiz" information about the Pentagon to be appreciated.

It also is a novel which ends with everyone living happily ever after, with the captain dropping out of the Navy and the wayward son being nearly killed in a student riot in the Pentagon. But he wasn't. Maybe he should have been.

The other novel, on the other hand, is just the opposite — a gripping, unpredictable spy story written by a former member of the CIA.

Marchetti has produced a taut, meaningful suspense story in which the hero (or is he?), Paul Franklin, decides he is fed up with the aims of his government in spy and investigative security matters. He hires himself out to become a double agent for the Soviets.

Ostensibly he has done it for the money, and he gets big money. He provides some valuable information on this government to the Soviets, gets spirited away to Moscow to receive the top award from the party chairman himself, and still manages to conceal his activities.

The only quarrel one has with the book is that Franklin escapes discovery for so long. Not only is he relatively free from suspicion at work, but his wife (whom we really never get to know) also abides by all his late night "work."

The plot twists abound, however, and eventually the chief "Commie-hunter" in the agency, an internal security head, confronts Paul with his knowledge that Paul's activities are known. But there is an offer of help: If Paul can expose the agency's Director and his secretary, both of whom are suspected also of being Soviet agents by the security chief, then Paul may be spared treason charges.

Paul's life ends as the novel ends, and in much the same impersonal manner as did that of Alexander Leamas in "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold." The whole book carries a cold feeling similar to Le Carre's work throughout.

But there are questions as the book closes. Was Paul believed expendable by his Soviet comrades and ordered killed, did American agents eliminate him, or was he simply the victim of a robbery-shooting in downtown Washington?

Marchetti has constructed a fine enough book to keep nearly everyone guessing.

(A Federal court has concurred with a request by the Justice Department and the CIA to halt publication of Marchetti's novel, because he may have violated a trust agreement between the CIA and its agents on disclosing "vital" information after the agent leaves CIA employment. —EDITOR.)